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HD **Bloodsucking ticks blamed as lethal lyme disease cases soar**
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LP Cases of a potentially lethal disease carried by ticks are on course to reach record numbers in Scotland this year.
The Press and Journal has learned that 140 cases of Lyme disease have already been recorded over the summer, significantly more than at the same time in 2006.
TD The debilitating condition can attack the nervous system and cause long-term problems - even death in rare cases - if not treated quickly.
Health Protection Scotland said the number of cases this year was now likely to exceed last year's total of 177.
A spokeswoman for HPS, part of the NHS in Scotland, said: "In the first 36 weeks of this year there have been 140 cases. It looks like we're on course to hit last year's total, or possibly more."
She added that 52 cases were discovered at the end of last year, indicating a substantial increase over the next few months.
The warning comes just months after figures revealed the number of people with Lyme disease had rocketed from just 10 a decade ago.
In England's Peak District, two cases were reported this year for the first time.
Experts are unsure why ticks are thriving, but warmer and wetter weather could be a major cause, coupled with better public knowledge.
The blood-sucking ticks - which pick up bacteria from animals - emerge from soil to climb damp grass, shrubs and bushes where they wait to hook on to a passing host.
Visitors to rural areas - particularly campers and hikers - are most at risk.
Dr Ken Oates, a public health consultant at NHS Highland, said: "There has been a genuine rise. Nobody can really say why. I would guess a summer like this which is warm and wet provides favourable conditions."
He said farmers and gamekeepers had reported a vast increase in ticks in recent years and added: "The message is, if you're bitten, get it out as soon as you can."
Dr Oates, based at Raigmore Hospital, Inverness, said one in five ticks could carry the bacteria.
He explained: "The ticks have to be feasting on your blood for some time for their to be a risk. Some people will fight it naturally. Only a small proportion will go on to get Lyme disease."
There is no vaccine to protect against Lyme disease - a condition first recorded in Victorian times.
Pauline Ganley, a registered nurse at the Masta Travel Clinic in Aberdeen, said: "It's only treatable afterwards, so it's good to cover up, wear long trousers and check for ticks regularly."
She said ticks survive into autumn and warned that travellers going abroad should take greater care because ticks on the continent can carry added dangers - the brain disease encephalitis.
Symptoms of Lyme disease, which are similar to flu, can take several weeks to show and doctors believe many people will never make the link between a tick bite and any resulting illness.
Experts say ticks thrive in damp conditions and can survive for more than a year without food. Last year's mild winter followed by the wet spring and summer mean ticks could have stayed dormant, boosting numbers.
The parasites can be removed with tweezers by pulling back on the body, taking care to avoid leaving the head buried inside the skin.
For more information, log on to www.masta-travel-health.com/tickalert
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